

# Biting in Child Care

By Anne Stonehouse

One of the most distressing reports that you can receive from your child care service is that your child has been bitten, and it can be even more distressing to be told that your child has bitten another child or an adult. No family wants to be informed that their child has been hurt or has hurt someone else. Biting can also be challenging for even the most experienced of child care professionals, as biting incidents often cause strong emotional reactions in families. An ongoing biting issue can be frustrating as there is no magic solution to prevent it occurring.

If your child has bitten someone you may feel guilty, or be concerned that there is something wrong with your child, and you may also be worried about the reactions of others. If your child has been bitten, you may feel concern about your child's safety and wellbeing, and you may perhaps feel anger toward the child who bit and/or toward the child care professionals for not protecting your child.

When biting occurs in child care, particularly when the issue is ongoing, you may have concerns about the level of supervision of children. Unfortunately, however, biting can happen very quickly and quite often without warning, and is not necessarily a sign that children not being adequately supervised.

Biting is very common in toddlers\* and is virtually unavoidable when they are cared for in groups. It's important to know that biting is a normal behaviour, and is not generally a sign, at this age, that something is wrong with the child, wrong at home or wrong with the child care service.

Not all toddlers go through a stage of biting, and some never bite anyone, but in any group of children aged 1½ - 3 years old there will be at least a few children who do bite. Toddlers are great at imitating other children, so if there's one child who bites, it is likely that others may start to do so as well.



## Why do children bite?

There are many possible reasons for biting in the toddler age group. These include:

- Children under the age of three years generally have a limited understanding of the effects of their behaviour on others. They don't appreciate how much biting hurts, even following the usually strong reaction from the child who has been bitten, as well as from adults in the environment. Children at this age are in the process of learning to read the feelings and behaviours of others. One of the big challenges of working with this age group is helping them to begin to understand which behaviours are acceptable and which are not. Learning this is a long process that goes on throughout childhood and beyond. So sometimes toddlers bite not knowing the effect it has. For example, kisses can become bites with no intention of hurting.
- Another skill that toddlers are only beginning to develop is self control, and at times they can be impulsive. Sometimes they cannot stop themselves from doing something, even though they may have an understanding that it isn't approved of. This means that they may bite another child simply because that child is close by, or just to get an interesting reaction.
- Older babies and toddlers are often quite orally oriented. Although they do so less than young babies, toddlers still frequently use their mouths to explore and investigate the world around them, and at times this can result in biting.

\* Biting is generally considered to be a 'normal' toddler behaviour. However, if the behaviour is severe, excessive or ongoing, or occurs in older children, it is recommended that families and/or child care professionals seek further support or advice.

- Toddlers may bite to express frustration when they:
  - are tired or unwell
  - cannot do something or have something they want
  - are being required to share or take turns
  - have to wait for too long, for example during transitions or waiting for meals
  - cannot communicate what they want, need or feel
  - are in too small a space and/or with too many other children
  - are being pressured to conform
  - have to deal with interference from other children
- Feeling tired or hungry can result in toddlers biting. This means that there may be times of the day that child care professionals have to be particularly aware of the possibility of biting occurring and need to increase supervision accordingly. For example, children in a child care group may be more likely to bite others around lunchtime or toward the end of the day.
- Boredom may also result in biting as it can be a highly successful way to make an impact. Biting can be like an 'action-reaction' game in that when a child bites, the reaction from the child who has been bitten, as well as the reaction of adults, are usually quick and loud and subsequently interesting and exciting.
- Biting may also occur due to a lack of attention as biting almost always brings significant attention from adults. There are times when even very young children may figure out that the best way to get an adult's attention is to do something that isn't approved of.
- If the program is overly regimented, with too many demands and adult-directed experiences, or too few choices, toddlers will feel as though they have little control over their experiences. The resulting feelings of frustration and powerlessness may lead them to bite others.
- A toddler in a care setting alongside older children may feel insecure or overwhelmed by the size and level of activity of older children, and may bite as a result. Over-excitement or over-stimulation can also lead to toddlers biting.
- Sometimes the explanation for biting is simply that the child is teething and it feels good to bite down on something.

## What do child care professionals do about biting?

Unfortunately there are no magic solutions to eliminate toddlers biting in child care. However, child care professionals use a range of effective strategies to manage biting incidents and to support children and families during this challenging phase of development.

Child care professionals know that one of their most important tasks is to help children to learn which behaviours are acceptable and which are not. One of the most valuable strategies they use to help children to learn not to bite is to acknowledge and show approval of children's behaviour when they communicate and interact with other children in desirable ways. In other words, helping children learn appropriate ways to behave reduces the chances of inappropriate behaviour occurring.

Child care professionals use the knowledge they have about how young children develop to help children to learn positive ways of interacting and communicating with others.

Typically child care professionals reserve their sternest reactions for hurtful behaviours such as biting. They want to communicate to children using their words, tone of voice and manner that biting is not acceptable. At the same time they appreciate the characteristics and skills of toddlers and realise that children who bite need help to stop, and are not 'bad' or 'naughty' children. Child care professionals also realise that when a child is going through a stage of biting others they will need to be watchful and supportive of the child and aim to prevent the biting behaviour before it occurs.





Knowing each child well helps child care professionals have an idea about what may be causing them to bite and to identify the specific triggers for biting for that child. Knowing what causes or what triggers biting in a particular child enables child care professionals to take steps to prevent the behaviour to avoid or minimise the triggers. For example, a child who is overly excited may be given some time apart from other children, not as a punishment but to give the child the opportunity to calm down and regain control. Knowing each child well also includes recognising the times of day or situations when biting is most likely to occur and increasing supervision at those times.

Another important strategy that child care professionals use to reduce the incidence of biting is to step in when a toddler is having a dispute with another child about sharing a toy or taking turns. This strategy is effective, as it not only helps the child to resolve the conflict before biting occurs, it also allows the child care professional to role model appropriate negotiation and conflict resolution.

When there is a biting incident often both of the children involved are upset and need attention. The children are separated, and the child who has been bitten is comforted by an adult, and first aid is administered if required. Depending on their level of understanding of what has happened, the child who has bitten is removed from the situation and spoken to in a clear, firm manner. For example, a child care professional may use simple phrases such as: 'Biting hurts. You must not bite.'

No one should ever bite a child back, as this hurts the child and gives a very confusing message: how can a child learn that biting is banned if adults bite? Similarly great harm is done if the child is encouraged to bite themselves 'to find out how it feels'. This does not work and, most importantly, is damaging as the child is being encouraged to self-harm. Adults should never bite a child playfully or gently. This can confuse children as they generally do not know the difference between 'playful' biting and 'hurtful' biting.

Biting behaviour almost always disappears, sometimes as mysteriously as it appeared, and there are no long-lasting effects. Child care professionals are committed to reducing and if possible eliminating biting using strategies that preserve the self-esteem of all concerned. Only as a last resort, after every effort has been made to constructively address a biting behaviour, would a service want to discuss with a family whether the child care setting is meeting the child's needs and whether a better situation might be found.

Every effort is made to ensure that the reaction to the child who has bitten does not reinforce the biting behaviour, while also giving the message that they are still valued and that they will be supported by child care professionals not to bite. When guiding children's behaviour, child care professionals avoid making children feel ashamed or embarrassed or damaging their self-esteem.

When biting occurs child care professionals will also look at children's experiences to determine whether this is contributing to biting behaviour. Things such as crowding, waiting time, too much going on, too little going on, too few choices, too few toys, and too little attention may be factors in biting. Depending on the likely cause of the biting, a change may be made to the environment, the way the day is organised, the experiences offered, or an effort made to pay special attention to a child who bites at a particular time of the day or in certain situations.

Child care professionals also help toddlers learn positive behaviours as alternatives to biting, for example by encouraging children to spread out in the space available, to use their words to express how they feel or what they want, and to seek help or attention in positive ways. They also help children to learn to protect themselves by moving away from a child who is angry and who is known to bite when they are upset.



## The partnership is critical

Child care professionals should aim to make sure that they tell you if your child has been bitten, and they should also talk with you if your child has bitten someone else. Families should not be made to feel a sense of blame or guilt and child care professionals should take responsibility for guiding children's behaviour positively in the service. However, child care professionals should work in partnership with families to address any behaviour concerns.

It is important that you don't punish your child for a biting incident that has happened in care, as it will have been dealt with at the time. Talking naturally and informally about how biting hurts and that it isn't a good thing to do, without dwelling on it, may help.

If your child has been bitten you may want to know who has bitten them. However, confidentiality in such a situation is crucial to protect the child who has bitten and their family.

It is important that families are able to trust that the child care professionals are working conscientiously to resolve or minimise any biting issues that occur.

When there is a problem such as biting happening, the partnership between families and child care professionals is most important. Child care professionals know how powerful and sensitive issues around biting are, and make every effort to handle biting in ways that are helpful to all concerned. A situation in which your child is bitten or has bitten another child is one that requires families and child care professionals to work together with mutual trust, open communication and respect for each other ■

### References and further reading

- Kinnel, G. (2002). *No Biting*. Minnesota: Redleaf Press.
- Gonzalez-Mena, J. & Widmeyer Eyer, D. (1997). *Infants, Toddlers and Caregivers*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Greenman, J. & Stonehouse, A. (1997). *Prime Times: A Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs*. Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman Australian Pty Limited.

### Useful website

- Better Health Channel - ([www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au))
- Child and Youth Health - ([www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com))
- Parent Link - ([www.parentlink.act.gov.au](http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au))
- Raising Children Network - ([raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au))



**For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.**

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